

HIGH-RISE FIRE SAFETY

Every year there are about 7,000 fires that break out in high-rise office buildings causing deaths, injuries and millions of dollars in fire damage. Most of these could be eliminated if everyone practiced good fire prevention on the job and planned ahead for a fire emergency.

In terms of fire safety, a high-rise building could be defined as a building taller than four stories or 75 feet since fire department aerial ladders rarely reach anything higher than that. The possibility of a fire deserves serious thought. In a high rise building, it's especially important to know when and how to escape in case of fire.

Prevention

- Smoke only where it is permitted.
- Use large non-tip ashtrays and empty them only when you are sure the ashes, matches and butts are cold. Make sure that no one, including visitors, has left cigarettes smoldering in wastebaskets or on furniture.
- Be alert around electrical equipment. If electrical equipment is not working properly or if it gives off an unusual odor - often the first sign of a problem that could cause a fire - disconnect the equipment and call the appropriate maintenance department.
- Promptly replace any electrical cord that is cracked or has a broken connection.
- When using extension cords, protect them from damage; do not put them across doorways or any place where they will be stepped on or chafed. Check the amperage load specified by the manufacturer or the "listing laboratory," and do not exceed it. Do not plug one extension cord into another and do not plug more than one extension cord into one outlet.
- Keep all heat-producing appliances away from the wall and away from anything that might burn. Leave plenty of space for air to circulate around copy machines, word processors and other equipment that normally gives off heat.

- Make sure all appliances in your work area - such as coffee makers and hot plates - are turned off at the end of each workday. It's best to assign one person to make this check every day.
- Keep storage areas, stairway landings and other out-of-the-way locations free of waste paper, empty boxes, dirty rags and other material that could fuel a fire or hamper an escape.
- Arson is the largest single cause of fires in office buildings. Therefore, proper security measures to keep unauthorized people out of the building will help prevent both theft and fire. In addition, make sure that alleys and other areas around buildings are well lit.

In Case of Fire

If a fire does break out, sound the alarm and call the fire department. Large fires start as small fires.

Learn the sound of your building's fire alarm. Encourage management to schedule regular fire drills so that everyone will know how the alarm sounds and how to escape.

Evacuation plans for your building should be posted where everyone can see them. They should be discussed with new employees during orientation.

Learn the evacuation plans and participate in fire drills.

Know the location of the two exits closest to your work area. Count the number of doors between your office and each of those exits - in case you must escape through a darkened, smoke-filled corridor where you can't see very well.

Close the door to the room containing the fire and close all other doors that you pass through during your escape, assuming you are the last person out. Closing the doors helps to control the spread of fire.

If it becomes necessary to use an escape route where there is smoke, crawl low under the smoke. Stay close to the floor where visibility is better, the air is less toxic and it is cooler. Before you open a closed door, feel it with the back of your hand. If it is hot, don't open it. Use your alternate escape route. If it feels normal, open it carefully.

Be ready to slam it shut if heat or smoke starts to rush in. Once you are outside the building, move well away from the building to a designated meeting area where all members of your floor can be accounted for. If anyone is missing, notify the fire department, **DO NOT** reenter the building.

If it's not possible to escape from the floor you are on, don't panic. Stay calm. Try to go to a room with an outside window and stay there. Try to keep smoke out and be sure doors are closed. Stuff the cracks around the door and vents using clothing, towels, paper or whatever is available. If water is available, dampen a cloth and breathe through it to filter out smoke and gases. If there is a working telephone, call the fire department and tell them exactly where you are. This information will be relayed immediately to the firefighters on the scene. Stay where you are and wave something to attract their attention.

Each person with a disability should be assigned a co-worker (and an alternate) to render assistance in case of an emergency. Participating in drills is especially important for people with disabilities.

Never use an elevator during a fire emergency. Most modern elevators select buttons are heat-activated, so they might go to the fire floor and stop there with the doors open, exposing passengers to deadly heat and fumes.

Be sure that stairwell doors are never locked.

Fire Extinguishers

Portable fire extinguishers are useful only if they are used properly, if they are right for the type of fire and if the fire is discovered immediately.

If there is a portable fire extinguisher in or near by, take the time to read the operating instructions and get training in how to use.

No one should attempt to fight even a small fire until people have been evacuated from the area and the fire department has been called.

Never attempt to fight a fire if any of the following is true:

- Uncertainty about how to use the extinguisher.
- The fire is spreading beyond the immediate area where it started.
- The fire could block the escape route.

Owners, Managers and Employers

If you own, manage or employ workers in a high-rise building, you should have the answers to these questions:

- Do you have a fire emergency plan?
- Has it been reviewed and approved by the fire department?
- Have tenants and employees been given full instructions on the details of the plan?
- Can the building be evacuated to the street without interfering with fire department personnel?
- If the answer to question #4 is no, are there areas of refuge in the building?
- Is there provision for physically challenged people who may be in the building?
- If a fire starts, will it be detected promptly? How?
- Will the fire department be notified promptly? How?
- Is there a provision for heating, ventilation and air conditioning smoke control?
- Is there an emergency communications system?
- Does the building have area or floor fire wardens? Have they been trained?
- Are fire pumps, emergency generators and lighting systems ready to use if needed?
- Are all exit doors and exit ways clear?
- Are emergency hand lines and fire extinguishers in working order?

- Will security measures, such as locking of doors, interfere with evacuation of occupants or access of firefighters?
- Is the fire department familiar with the building in all-pertinent details?
- Has space been designated for a fire department command center in the building?